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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MINSK 000265

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/09/16

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM ECON BO

SUBJECT: CEC Secretary on Early Voting and Problems with Candidates during the Electoral Process

Ref: Minsk 223

Classified by Ambassador George Krol for Reasons 1.4 (B,D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Poloffs met with Central Election Commission (CEC) Secretary Nikolai Lozovik on March 9. Lozovik at first explained Belarus' early voting process and answered questions concerning the censoring of opposition candidate television speeches and the March 2 beating of a candidate at the hand of security forces. Lozovik admitted his dissatisfaction with unequal press coverage and President Lukashenko's harsh public statements, but claimed opposition candidates provoke the situation. Lozovik opined that security forces were justified in how they handled opposition candidate Aleksandr Kozulin on March 2 and again criticized the OSCE for negative assessments of Belarus' election process. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Pol/Econ Chief and Poloff met with CEC Secretary Nikolai Lozovik on March 9 to discuss the procedures for early voting. The meeting started with Lozovik on the offensive, but after being questioned about visible irregularities in the election process, Lozovik became cautious with his answers.

Early Voting

¶3. (C) Lozovik explained that according to the electoral code, early voting will begin on March 14, five days before Election Day, and last until March 18. Polling stations will be opened between 10:00 Q 14:00 and 16:00 Q 19:00 and will have no less than two election commission members present at all times. The only difference between elections and early voting is that fewer election committee members must be present for the latter. The process will be open to domestic and international observers and the CEC expects 15 percent of the electorate to vote at this time.

¶4. (C) Lozovik, in his usual nature, claimed that Belarus' early voting process was a common "democratic" process similar to those implemented in the U.S. and West. He cited the U.S.' system of absentee ballots and considered it more scandalous since votes can be cast two and a half months before Election Day, whereas in Belarus, votes cannot be cast earlier than five days before. According to Lozovik, Belarus' early voting process gives citizens a chance to vote at a more convenient time if they are unable to make it to polling stations on Election Day.

Lozovik Attacks OSCE

¶5. (C) P/E Chief asked Lozovik why OSCE/ODIHR observers in the past found Belarus' early voting process problematic. Lozovik claimed to not know, opining that 90% of international observers in the 2004 Parliamentary elections believed early voting was done fairly and openly, but the "final ODIHR report only represented the opinion of the dissenting 10%." Lozovik sharply criticized the OSCE, claiming that its past reports were "political" rather than legal documents that contained nothing but "betrayal." Lozovik called the OSCE's reports "insulting" and "stupid" in context. Lozovik claimed to have developed a good relationship with ODIHR observation mission head Ahrens, who regularly meets with Lozovik to inform him on ODIHR conclusions, but he ridiculed the OSCE/ODIHR for distributing reports of election violations before verifying them or discussing them with the CEC.

Lozovik Goes on Defensive, Admits Mistakes

¶6. (C) P/E Chief and Poloff began asking pointed questions about visible irregularities in the election process. Poloff asked Lozovik whether it was fair for Lukashenko's picture and platform to dominate the front pages of all state-controlled newspapers while opposition candidate platforms were located on the inner pages. Lozovik admitted that he was not happy with the unequal coverage of candidates, but he could not offer a solution or an explanation. [Note: At this point in the meeting, Lozovik opened his notebook and began taking notes.]

¶7. (C) P/E Chief and Poloff quizzed Lozovik as to why the state-controlled Belarusian National Television (BT) censored criticism of the President from opposition

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candidate Aleksandr Lozovik's March 2 TV speech and his and 10+ Coalition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich's radio addresses, whereas Lukashenko was allowed to call the opposition "thugs" on live television. The CEC secretary expressed disappointment with the President's "harsh" statements and wished he had "used a softer tone," but since the presentation was live, it was impossible to edit the content before it reached viewers.

¶8. (C) As for censoring Kozulin and Milinkevich, Lozovik claimed that BT was following Belarus' broadcast laws that prevent people from slandering or libeling the President with accusations that cannot be proved. Poloff disagreed, citing as an example Milinkevich's censored remarks. Lukashenko mistakenly claimed in a recent speech that 15th Century Belarusian writer Francis Skaryni lived in St. Petersburg, even though the city was built 160 years after Skaryni's death. Milinkevich could prove that Lukashenko said this statement simply by presenting a recording of Lukashenko's speech. Lozovik offered no comment.

¶9. (C) The CEC Secretary moved to criticizing Kozulin, claiming that nine minutes was not edited from Kozulin's March 2 TV address, as Kozulin has claimed. According to Lozovik, Kozulin's speech was edited, but it still lasted 30 minutes, proving that such allegations were part of the opposition's propaganda campaign to create scandals. [Comment: It is true that Kozulin's March 2 TV address lasted 30 minutes even with the edits. Poloffs have not found an explanation for this, but it could be that Kozulin ran over his time when recording the speech, giving BT a "legitimate" reason to edit as they saw fit.]

The CEC Does Not Promote Censorship

¶10. (C) Lozovik claimed the CEC, in general, did not approve of censoring candidates, but the CEC did not have the authority to determine whether a candidate's statements are right or wrong. If candidates are offended by

another's comments, then they must file a complaint and settle the matter via a lawsuit in the courts. Lozovik, however, immediately contradicted himself when he said the CEC could disqualify a candidate if it feels the candidate purposely slandered and libeled another candidate.

Lozovik: Security Forces in the Right for Beating Kozulin

¶11. (C) According to Lozovik, Kozulin's actions at the Press Center on February 17 and his March 2 beating were provocations on the part of Kozulin (reftel). Lozovik opined that the purpose of Kozulin's actions and his statements about "being a Marine" were to get a strong reaction, such as bruises, to aid in his campaign. Lozovik poignantly added that the security services had taken the "necessary and proper" action in dealing with Kozulin. P/E Chief told the CEC Secretary that the beating and detention of Kozulin, his supporters, and journalists did not seem at all necessary and tainted the electoral process.

¶12. (C) Lozovik opined that Milinkevich's practice of assembling unsanctioned meetings with voters was also a provocation and violated election regulations. P/E Chief noted that opposition candidates often complain that local authorities systematically deny access to venues, permit them to use only the smallest venues in town, or do not grant permission at all to meet with voters. Lozovik, with his guard down, admitted that seeking permission from local authorities to meet with voters may be a bad law, but nonetheless, it was a law that needed to be followed. Lozovik opined that a "mutual language" can be found between the opposition and local authorities, but the opposition had decided to continue with its current illegal approach. Lozovik agreed with P/E Chief that the electoral code requires the CEC to provide assistance to candidates in securing venues for campaign rallies, but countered the CEC has helped the candidates. He was not willing to state that the CEC was doing all it could to help the candidates find venues.

Comment

¶13. (C) Once again, Lozovik maintained the democratic nature of Belarus' election process and its superiority over U.S. democracy. But after being confronted with tough questions, Lozovik let his guard down, admitted

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discrepancies favoring Lukashenko, and failed to give reasonable explanations. Lozovik's statements, which at times seemed to be his personal opinion rather than the CEC stance, sounded similar to those of other Lukashenko bureaucrats who seem to have trouble believing and defending the President's policy.

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